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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE'S "GLOBAL SCHOOLHOUSE" PROJECT

1. (SBU) Summary: Singapore seeks to establish itself as a regional and global education hub through its "Global Schoolhouse" project. The project has had mixed results. It was dealt a blow in July when the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Asia precipitously closed its local campus, but it received a boost from the October opening of New York University's (NYU's) Tisch Asia campus here. Some foreign universities have been reluctant to come to Singapore due to concerns over restrictions on academic freedom, although the GOS demonstrated increased flexibility in this area in order to attract NYU. End Summary.

Singapore Aims High...

2. (U) Some of the same factors that make Singapore an attractive regional business center make it a logical regional education hub: its reputation for quality primary and secondary education, clean and safe living conditions, widespread use of English, and a central location. GOS officials want to attract a total of 150,000 international students by 2015 (up from approximately 60,000 in 2007), in line with plans to attract more foreign talent and multinational companies. They estimate that the additional campuses needed to attract this number of students will create 22,000 new jobs. Dr. Hellmut Schutte, former dean and professor at the INSEAD Asia campus, told us that INSEAD chose Singapore over twelve other Asian contenders because of Singapore's easy access to other major Asian economies, its research subsidies, and its cosmopolitan environment.

3. (U) Nearly twenty established international universities from the United States, Europe, and Asia have branch campuses in Singapore. Singapore Economic and Development Board (EDB) officials hope that these "brand name" universities will attract more international students. They estimate that each foreign student spends between \$3,000 and \$8,000 a year on living expenses, on top of tuition fees. They predict that some of these international students will choose to stay in Singapore, boosting Singapore's labor force and stimulating economic growth.

...But Faces Obstacles

4. (U) In April 2004, the GOS selected the University of New South Wales to spearhead the "Global Schoolhouse" project by establishing the first full-scale foreign university campus in Singapore. The business plan called for an eventual enrollment of 15,000. However, following a change in its Australia-based management, UNSW closed in July 2007, after

operating for only one semester, citing low enrollment and projected financial losses.

¶5. (SBU) EDB provided USD 32.3 million to support the opening of UNSW's Singapore campus (USD 17.3 million in grants and USD 15 million in loans). EDB officials assert that UNSW Asia left because it had underestimated the cost of setting up and running the campus. These officials admit that UNSW's pullout hurt Singapore's reputation as an education hub.

¶6. (SBU) Some foreign universities have decided against setting up in Singapore due to concerns over restrictions on freedom of expression and academic freedom. In October 2005, Britain's Warwick University abandoned plans to set up a full campus here, citing academic freedom concerns. The same issue weighed heavily with the University of Chicago's faculty, and the final vote to establish an executive MBA program in Singapore passed by a narrow margin, according to Beth Bader, managing director of Chicago's executive MBA program. Chicago appears to be comfortable with its decision, however; officials from the university's Harris School of Public Policy Studies recently visited, in part to assess prospects for establishing a graduate and/or executive program here. Katherine Drummond, Director of Administration for NYU's Tisch Asia, told us that they carefully considered academic and artistic freedom issues when deciding to establish a Singapore campus in October. NYU's agreement with the GOS reportedly permits freedom of expression for on-campus activities. It also allows NYU to maintain a film library of uncensored works. However, these can only be used on campus for instructional activities.

Comment

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¶7. (SBU) The GOS is keen to attract universities with name-brand recognition and has shown some flexibility in meeting universities' requirements on issues such as academic freedom. Maintaining such flexibility, along with an operating environment that allows the programs to be profitable, will be key to Singapore's achieving "Global Schoolhouse" status. Over the long run it will be interesting to see whether foreign schools and students have a liberating influence on Singaporean society or whether they have to learn to adapt to its more restrictive environment.

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